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ABSTRACT

By investigating the similarities and differences between speech and writing, teachers can help students mature as writers. The difference between speech and writing in conveying meaning is explained by the degree of context dependence of the utterance or passage. Speech is highly context-dependent because a speaker depends on a listener to assist in filling in meaning while writing must provide its own context, audience, and explicit meaning. Writing problems may reflect a student's effort to apply inappropriate oral language habits to writing. The writing instructor's task is to move students from the high context-dependence of speech to the relative context-independence of writing. Because of the differences between speech and writing, some inferences can be made to help students achieve context-independence in their writing. Instructors should (1) see speaking and writing as developmentally and functionally complementary, (2) devote time to requesting clarification or elaboration of ideas, (3) provide inexperienced writers with activities in which the form and function of speech and writing are made as similar as possible, (4) recognize that making meaning is more important and should precede developing grammatical context, and (5) realize that some qualities desirable in speech, such as consistency in voice and tone, are desirable in writing. (EL)

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Speaking, Writing, and the Making of Meaning

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Speaking, Writing, and the Making of Meaning

The most crucial difference between informal, conversational speech and formal, academic writing, and that which, therefore, contributes most to potential "oral language interference" with writing ability, is in the ways in which the two forms of expression create and then communicate meaning. Indeed, the very concept of meaning implies communication since communication is the process by which people create shared meanings, and by comprehension we really mean the ability to reconstruct meaning (O'Keefe, Cambourn). This difference in conveying meaning is explained primarily by the degree of context-dependence of the utterance, so communicative competence, as Shafer calls it, is a measure of the speaker or writer's ability to judge the appropriateness of his or her utterance to the context in which it is presented, and intelligibility is created by the adaptation of the message to the receiver's understanding of the context. As a result, the writing instructor's role in helping students in coping with oral language interference is to assist them in moving from the high context-dependence of speech to the relative context-independence of writing.

Writing in which such oral interference may be present is characterized either by the retention of acceptable features of speech which are inappropriate in writing or, conversely, by the omission of accepted writing conventions. Specific signs of this problem may include, but are not limited to, difficulty with the arrangement of ideas, incoherent or illogical topic

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shifts, gaps in patterns of coherence, vague pronoun reference, premature closure on points, incomplete parallelism, or switching verb tenses. These indications may reflect a student's unconscious but nonetheless real effort to apply inappropriate oral language habits to writing. Jeanne Halpern, in her analysis of the Haber Oral Biography Project, listed speech features which she identified as interfering with meaning: "false starts, asides, interruptions, recastings of previous sentences or phrases, potential ambiguities and unclear or misleading grammatical constructions." Obviously, then, unskilled writers' oral language interference takes two broad forms: first, surface forms which violate the conventions of standard written English by using the sounds and syntax of speech, and second, and more important, abbreviated meanings, in which context-dependent writing fails to be intelligible even if it is relatively free of surface errors (Collins).

Speech is highly context-dependent as a result of shared understandings or assumptions between speaker and auditor or audience. Meaning is created through dialogue which necessarily assumes cooperation, collaboration, and reciprocal prompting between the persons involved; in effect, a speaker depends on a listener to assist in filling in meaning, so speech typically is implicit, unelaborated, and nonlinear, characterized by the fits and starts, the tentativeness and backtracking that the Haber tapes illustrate. In addition, speaking employs many forms of extra- or paralinguistic information (sometimes called non-verbal language) such as gestures and facial expressions, as well as types of linguistic information not available to

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writers: inflection, intonation, pauses, phonological grammar, oral syntax.

In contrast, writing, as a different communication medium, must provide its own context, audience, and explicit meaning. Because of the absence both of the speech context and of the primary audience, writing must represent meaning differently and more fully than does speech; for example, rather than being elliptical or memory/associative, as Halpern describes speech, writing must be made linear and comprehensible over time. But inexperienced writers write as if their readers will or can cooperate or collaborate with them, so that they can say to their readers, as we all do to our listeners, "you know what I mean," with confidence that the readers will, in fact, fill in the context that completes the meaning, something which they are incapable of doing. As a result, immature writers do not know how to initiate a written text satisfactorily, how to develop or elaborate it adequately, or how to bring it to a close without an auditor. They tend to retain the stylistic features of oral language, such as the coordinate linking of ideas with "and," and, at the psychological level, they are fearful of the aloneness and apparent permanence of writing. Finally, they have great difficulty maintaining a sense of audience awareness when the audience is an ill-defined, generalized other; this remains true even when they are told to "imagine" a specific reader or group of readers for their writing. They must learn to generate adequate text without a respondent, to engage in whole-text planning, to function as readers and editors of their own writing, and to write in a context-free manner in which they create meaning

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by providing all the necessary information themselves. Also, they must learn rules for surface features of their writing--punctuation or paragraphing, for example--that are grammatical or mechanical, not phonological.

Given the nature and scope of these speaking/writing differences, and given the earlier competence with and confidence in their oral language which humans develop, it is not surprising that signs of oral language interference appear in many students' writing, but we can also infer from this knowledge some suggestions which might assist us as composition teachers in helping our students achieve the context-independence which is the mark of writing maturity.

First, and most fundamentally, we should see speaking and writing as developmentally and ultimately functionally complementary, not as contradictory or conflicting. We must not mistake writing for a way of making and conveying meaning which replaces or supplants speech--most communication, after all, continues to be oral for all of us--but, instead, as following speaking developmentally and growing out of it logically. What we should try to do is to create classroom activities that build on students' already developed oral skills while simultaneously helping them to overcome interfering speech traits.

What are some possible activities? One possibility is that students be encouraged to use a form of Robert Zoellner's "talk-write" approach to pre-writing; in effect, students would think aloud, write down what they had thought, and then respond orally to their own just-written words (Payne). This method not only allows students to use their oral competence but also has the

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benefit of showing them that writing, like speaking, is a tentative activity which requires much doing over before it appears permanently on paper.

Another implication is that, since students often write monologue with a dialogic quality, instructors should devote a considerable amount of conference time to requesting clarification or elaboration of ideas--the filling in of context or meaning. In this way, students are permitted to work out orally that which they must eventually learn to supply in writing. This approach could also be used in peer conferences with benefit to both the student writer and to the reader: training them to read each others' work thoughfully and to ask for full and explicit meaning, since meaning is particularly denoted by sufficient content and discernible patterns of logic and coherence.

An additional implication is that instructors should try to provide inexperienced writers with activities in which the form and function of speech and writing are made as similar as possible. At first, students should not only be permitted but also encouraged to use expressive language, because it is close to the self, is implicit, and is relatively unstructured. Stories or narratives provide a good starting point because they balance detail with generalization and concrete with abstract in a naturally linear form which can help students gradually to produce writing which is more transactional, decentered, and audience aware. This same relationship exists, as Glassner has pointed out, between reflexive writing with its tentative, exploratory, speech-like qualities, and extensive writing of which the ubiquitous classroom report is a typical example.

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Yet another implication for teaching is the recognition that oral language interference occurs primarily and importantly at the level of context or code, not grammar, so the most significant errors produced by it are semantic, for example, incoherence or inexplicitness, rather than morphological or syntactic. As a result, making meaning is more important than and should precede developing grammatical competence. Students should learn first to create explicit meaning, then how to make that meaning conform to standard written English.

Finally, instructors should realize that several qualities desirable in speech, such as consistency of voice and tone, are also desirable in writing. They must not forget that rhetoric, a term now applied widely to writing, originated as a way of understanding and describing oratory, so many attractive features are derived from oral language and should be retained as part of the rhetoric of writing.

If we continue to investigate the pertinent similarities and differences between speech and writing, then we should be able to take better advantage of our understanding of those relationships in helping our students to mature as writers.